

# Semper Fidelis

LELAND INGERSOLL, IN GODEY'S

LONG after the speaker's words had died away, the listening expectancy waited in hushed expectancy, unwilling to believe that he had finished, and unable to come down all at once from the heights to which they had been raised. At length they began to file slowly out through the high narrow doors into the frosty air. In almost total silence the crowd separated, with the unconsciousness of surroundings which comes to men when their minds have been stirred deeply.

John Ordway and his wife came from the church among the last, and walked arm in arm to the long low shed, where many wagons were waiting; both had been strongly moved by the evening's sermon, but in different ways, indicative, perhaps, of their widely differing temperaments. In the man the newly awakened feeling resulted in an uneasy mental condition, which only intensified a natural sensitiveness. Like many others of strong character he kept silent on the subjects which most interested him, fearing lest he should be unable to rightly express his thoughts, or should be misunderstood. The woman's nature spoke in her face, which was of the highly emotional type so rarely met with among those whose lives are busy ones; the eyes were those of a dreamer, always hoping to find in each new experience the realization of a hundred half-comprehended longings; the parted lips showed the probable sway of impulse, and the absence of the firmness which should have been its check, was evident in the lines of the delicately sensitive chin.

"I never turned this corner yet but what it seemed like I was turning away from all that was mean and unpleasant," he said, slowly. "I feel as though I was leavin' behind me all the things that trouble me because I ain't used to 'em, and can't understand 'em. It's been so always, and I'd hate to have it any other way. Now, if what ye want to say is going to be disagreeable for either of us two, I'd rather ye'd wait until we got home, and not have to go into the house feelin' bitter against—against anybody. Maybe ye don't quite understand me, Eunice?"

"I understand," she said, with a half sob. "Oh, yes, I understand."

"Go in by the fire," he said. "I'll like me some time to fix things up." But when he came back from the stable he found her waiting, leaning against one of the posts of the porch and looking out across the darkness of the valley.

"I wanted to wait until we could go in together," she said. "The long low shed was full of changing shadows, which danced across the thin polished floor, and lost themselves in the corners of the irregular ceiling, when Ordway crossed to the huge fireplace and piled some stooks of soft wood on the glowing ashes."

Then, twisting himself out of his heavy coat and bestowing it, together with his cap, on a convenient table, he dragged from the chimney corner a great old-fashioned chair, and sank back luxuriously in its capacious depths. His wife had also removed her wraps, and now took her seat at the other side of the fireplace, on a low stool, drawn back just within the wavering boundary of shadow. At length she spoke, slowly and with evident effort at calmness.

"You must try to be patient with me," she said. "You'll be astonished, I know, and I am afraid you'll be angry—I shouldn't blame you any—but I want you to wait till I've finished."

"Are ye quite sure ye better begin, or hadn't ye better let it go till tomorrow, anyway?" he asked, earnestly. "I'd rather not hear anything that ye might say unless ye say it of your own free will," he added.

"I isn't that," she said, quickly. "I've wanted to speak to you so many times, and haven't dared to. I'll feel a thousand times happier when I've told you, no matter what happens. Let me go on now."

"Maybe I know what—" he began, and checked himself smilingly, but with a glance of almost womanly tenderness at her averted face. "I'm listenin'," he said.

She hesitated as if to gain strength, and he marked how the slender figure quivered with the effort of her hurried breathing.

"I had promised to marry Willis before I knew you," she said, unsteadily. "We quarrelled about some little thing and each was too proud to speak first. Finally, he went away without seeing me. You know how we heard that he died in Mexico. I believed it—we all did—and I cried myself to sleep night after night, because I hadn't acted differently. As time went on I began to forget little by little, and after awhile it all seemed like a sort of dream; then you came into my life and taught me to trust you and turn to you for help in everything."

She paused and lifted her eyes to his face. "I've told you the truth so far," she said, almost fiercely. "And it's true that I loved you more than I could ever understand. You must believe this." Her voice trembled pitifully. "You do believe me, John?" she asked. "Say that you do believe me."

Ordway drew his hand across his eyes in an involuntary movement. "I ain't never doubted it," he answered, softly.

She gave a quick sigh of relief, and let her head sink again upon her breast as she spoke again.

"I was happy and contented for two long years. It was like heaven, and you were happy, too, John?"

"Happy?" he said. "Lord, yes; nobody'll ever know how much."

"And then little Dora was born," she went on, "and somehow all our trouble began right there, for it seemed as though your baby hands took hold of our hearts and pushed them apart, a little at first, and then more and more. I actually thought that you didn't care about her—I know it was wrong but I thought it—and I got

to feeling against you as I would against some one that was watching for a chance to hurt my little one. Well, things got worse and worse, and when she died I almost believed you were to blame in some way—I didn't know how. Oh, it's awful, I think about it, but I couldn't help feeling that way. Will you ever forgive me for it?"

"I never laid it up against ye," he answered. "I reckoned it was natural, and I know ye wasn't well; so I tried to forget all about that part of our life, and I done it—almost."

She looked up at him gratefully. "You are trying to help me," she said. "Not many men would do that. The rest of my story is harder to tell, and harder to listen to. You remember that Willis came back and hunted us up. He came at the worst possible time for all of us. I was set against you, and half wild about baby's death, and reckless to everything. He found that out, and kept pleading with me and urging me to go away with him. Day after day, when you were at work, he used to come to the house and talk to me—always in the same strain. I ought to have sent him away; but I didn't. His sympathy was so ready that I didn't see the purpose nor the falseness in it. It was as though some evil spirit put the words into his mouth, and I listened; God help me, I listened—and that wasn't all."

She started to her feet, and stood facing her husband, her arms outstretched with a wild gesture.

"I was no fault of mine that I did not sin against you in deed as I did in thought," she cried. "If it had not been for some accident—I don't even know what it was—I should not have been here now. I went to meet him one night. We were to drive to Oakley, and take the train for some place. I waited, I don't know how many hours, but he didn't come; at last I crept home and found you asleep. All night I sat by the fire waiting for some word from him, for I was ready to go—yes, even then ready to go. In the morning a letter came, saying that an unforeseen accident had happened and he would let me know about it soon. I never heard from him again."

She paused, and looking at him fearfully, as though expecting a violent outburst of anger, but he said nothing, and at last she spoke again, unable to bear the silence.

"That's all, John," she cried desperately. "It's the truth, and the whole truth. There's no more to tell."

Still he sat silent, looking a little forward in a bounding attitude and watching the flickering firelight absently, with a curious expression on his heavily lined face.

"Won't you speak to me?" she asked, tremblingly. "Haven't you been listening? Have I done wrong in telling you? Speak to me, for God's sake; I can't bear it."

The words were lost in a storm of sobbing, and she threw herself down on her knees beside him, hiding her face with her hands in the arms of the old-fashioned chair. Ordway looked down at her with an unsteady smile which was like a caress. "Don't talk so, Eunice," he said gently. "You'll be glad all the rest of your life, I think, on account of just what you've cried about now. Look up, my girl, and maybe I can think the story for you." He put out his hand and stroked the bowed head with clumsy tenderness. "Ye say ye never knowed why he didn't come that night," he said. "I could a told ye why."

She raised her head with a startled exclamation. "You?" she cried.

"Yes," he answered. "Just me. He stayed away because I told him he'd better, and he knowed I meant what I said."

Her eyes grew full of a wondering fear and she gazed away from him, but he smiled again and detained her with gentle force. "Wait," he said. "I ain't crazy. Did ye think I was so blind all them months that I didn't see what was happenin'? I'd knowed it if I'd been miles away, for there ain't never any trickin' your heart that I don't feel it. Lord bless ye, I know what was goin' on, but I thought 'twas best to say nothing an' let ye wrestle it out alone. Finally, when I noticed that circumstances an' everything was likely to be too much for ye, why I just stepped in an' talked to Willis. He understood, an' that settled it."

"Then you've known?" she interrupted, breathlessly. "You've known all this time?"

He nodded, cheerfully. "All this time," he answered.

"But you never said a word to me—you never acted as though—" she paused, uncertainly, the look of fear still lingering in her eyes. "How could you keep silent at such a time?" she cried. "I can't believe it."

"It's always harder for me to talk than to keep still," he said, slowly. "Surely ye've found that out long ago. I couldn't a said a word without makin' things worse most likely; so I thought the best thing to do was to just wait—an' I been waitin'."

"Waitin'?" she repeated. "Waitin' for what?"

"For what's happenin' Eunice," he said, softly. "Waitin' to hear just what I've heard tonight; to have ye kneed down here, holdin' me as ye're kneedin' now, a wantin' the help I can give ye, an' a trustin' me enough to ask for it." He lifted his hand to check her question, and went on in the same tone. "I ain't never been like any of the men ye used to know. I ain't quick to understand little things, an' I know what's wanted without bein' told right out. That's what comes of livin' in the back country. When I first met you, Eunice, it was like seein' a picture come out of its frame an' walk an' talk to people."

The laughing note died out of his voice, and in its place there came an almost pathetic gentleness. "Ye've never felt the way I have," he said. "An' ye couldn't understand how I've loved ye. Lord, it's been like father an' mother an' husband rolled into one. Why, for a year or more after we were marryed, I'd get an' watch ye wonderin' all the time whether my luck wasn't too good to be true. I was always afraid that there was a mistake somewheres, for it didn't seem right nor natural that ye should see anything in me to care about, unless—unless it was because I cared so much for you; I tried to think that sometimes."

The woman was clinging to his arm and weeping convulsively. He soothed her with kindly awkwardness.

"Tain't your fault, little girl," he said. "Lord, no; it just happened that way. There ain't no need to cry about nothin' now; the time for cryin' all gone past, an' I don't think I'll ever come again."

Her sobs had died away, and she looked up with a white, drawn face, her eyes shining strangely.

"Thank God, I told you tonight," she said, brokenly.

"We'll look back on it as the happiest night of them all," he answered.



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"I'll be only a pleasure lookin' back. It wa'n't all a pleasure lookin' forward, for I almost got discouraged sometimes, even though I knowed it would come right in the end. But it's worth all the long waitin' it's worth all and more. Lord, how I've hoped an' prayed for this time that's here now."

His self-control seemed all at once to desert him, and he sprang to his feet with the startling quickness of a released animal.

"I knowed it would come," he cried, and his voice rang and echoed through the low room like the jubilant note of a hunter's call to arms. "I knowed it would come. I was afraid it might be too late, but there ain't no single thing that I'd have changed."

He stopped abruptly, as though half ashamed of his sudden outburst, and his eyes fast lovingly upon the abject figure in the shadow.

"Ain't ye glad it's happened?" he asked. "Surely ye ain't givin' over the very thing that should make ye the most thankful?"

She did not answer, and for a moment he watched her in perplexed anxiety.

"Then he understood, and knelt down by her side.

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